



Al-Risala 2000

January-February

Christianity and Islam

The Prophet of Islam was born in Makkah in Arabia in 570 AD. and died in 632 in Madina, another city in Arabia at the age of 62 years.

The Prophet Muhammad's father had died before his birth, therefore, his grandfather, Abdul Muttalib, brought him up. After the latter's death, the duty devolved upon his paternal uncle, Abu Talib.

Muhammad (May God's blessings be upon him) was twelve years old when he accompanied his uncle and patron, Abu Talib, on a caravan journey to Syria, in the course of which their trading party camped at Busra. There he met a Christian monk known as Bahira, who was well versed in Christian scriptures. This monk happened to come out of his cell and saw Muhammad. He recognized in Muhammad the signs of prophethood as recounted in Christian books. Therefore he asked Muhammad some questions, which he answered quite satisfactorily. Afterwards Bahira went up to his uncle, Abu Talib, and said, 'How is this youth related to you?' 'He replied, 'He is my son.' Bahira said to him, 'He is not your son; this young man's father cannot be alive.' Abu Talib said, 'Indeed, he is my brother's son and my brother died even before his birth.'

'True,' he said. 'Return to your land with your nephew and protect him against enemies. For, by God, if they see him and know about him what I know about him, they will do him harm. A great future lies in store for him. So hurry to your land with the young boy.'

Abu Talib felt a little alarmed and took him back to Makkah soon after he had finished his trading in Syria (*Seerah* Ibn Hisham, part I) Much later, at the age of forty when the Prophet was in a cave called Hira, situated near Makkah, he was visited by the angel Gabriel, who came to him with the first revelations from God. (Quran, chapter No. 96.)

"Read in the name of your Lord Who created, created man from clots of congealed blood. Read! Your Lord is the Most Bountiful One, Who taught by the pen, taught man what he did not know."

The Prophet's biographers write that after this extraordinary experience with the Angel Gabriel and the First Revelation of the initial verses, he rushed back home from Hirah. Trembling with fear, he said to his wife Khadijah 'Cover me with a cloak, cover me with a cloak.' After a while, when he had recovered a little from his state of anxiety, he related what he had experienced to his wife and said: 'I feel there is danger to my life.' She responded, 'No, never, God will never bring you to grief.' Then she took him to Waraqa ibn Naufal, who was her cousin. He had embraced Christianity' and had a good knowledge of the religion.

Hearing from him what had happened, Waraqa said without any hesitation 'The One who came to you is the same *Namus* (the specially appointed Divine Messenger) who came to Moses. I wish I were a young

man and could live till the time when your people will expel you. The Prophet said, 'Will my people expel me? He replied:

'Yes, no one has been before, who brought the same thing that you have brought, without the people turning hostile to him.'

The third encounter between Christianity and Islam took place a few years after the Prophethood of Muhammad, may God's blessings be upon him. During this period Makkah was dominated by the idolaters. They vigorously opposed the call of monotheism by the Prophet of Islam, and began to persecute the Prophet and his Companions. At this juncture the Prophet advised his followers to leave temporarily for Abyssinia, (in Africa) a Christian kingdom – where "a king rules with justice, a land of truthfulness – until God leads us to a way out of our difficulty." Therefore, a number of Muslims emigrated to Abyssinia on the Prophet's advice. Here they lived under the protection of the Negus. About eighty men, not counting women and children, had migrated. They lived in Abyssinia until after the Prophet's emigration to Madina.

The Makkans were so upset at this exodus of the Muslims to Abyssinia that they immediately sent to the Negus a delegation carrying precious gifts in order to bring about the emigrants' extradition and return to Makkah.

The two ambassadors, 'Amr ibn al-A'as and Abdullah ibn abi Rabiah, presented to the Negus and his patriarchs their precious gifts and asked for permission to have the Muslim emigrants extradited and sent back to Makkah. They said to the Negus, 'O king! A number of ignoble plebeians from Makkah have taken refuge in your country. They have apostasized from the religion of their people and have not joined your religion. They follow a new religion, known neither to us nor to you, which they created.' The Negus refused to yield to their appeal until he had a chance to hear the refugees plead their own case. He sent for them and asked, 'What is this new religion which caused you to separate yourselves from your people, a religion which is different from mine as well as from any other of the known religions?'

Then Jafar ibn Abi Talib rose and gave a brief description of the teachings of Islam. The Negus asked him to recite some of the revelations which their Prophet claimed to have come to him from God. Jafar then recited to the Negus the first part of the chapter entitled Mary.

When the patriarchs heard this statement, confirming the Message of the Evangel, they were pleasantly surprised and said: 'These words must have sprung from the same fountainhead from which the words of our master Jesus Christ have sprung.' The Negus then said, 'What you have just recited and that which was revealed to Moses must have both issued from the same source. Go forth into my kingdom; I shall not extradite you at all.'

The Muslims found under his protection the peace and security they sought, and lived in his country until they found cause to return, while Muhammad (may peace be upon him) was still in Makkah. (The *Encyclopedia of Seerah*, Vol viii, p 702-3.)

In the classical literature of Islam, Christ and Christianity are mentioned in many forms. Christ has been called 'Spirit of God' (4:1717) in the Quran:

Of Mary the Quran has this to say:

'We breathed into her of Our spirit, and made her and her son a sign to all men.' (21:91)

Regarding the Christians in general the Quran, referring to Christ and his followers, says:

'We gave Christ the Gospel and put compassion and mercy in the hearts of his followers.'
(57:27)

In another Chapter the Quran states:

'The nearest in affection to the Muslims are those who say: "We are Christians." That is because there are priests and monks among them; and because they are free from pride.'
(5:82-83)

I would like to conclude with a hadith recorded in *Sahih* Muslim, which is regarded as the most authentic collection of traditions after *Sahih* Bukhari.

Mustaurid, a companion of the Prophet, reported that the Prophet, (Blessings of God be upon him) said: "The Day of Judgement will not come until the Christians outnumber all other people." When Mustaurid related this hadith to Amr ibn al A' as, a senior companion of the Prophet, the latter endorsed this narration with these words:

You are indeed right. The Christians have four characteristics. They are the most forbearing in times of adversity; they do not allow their spirits to be broken but promptly recover from every setback; they are the first to charge again after retreat; and they are the best of all in caring for the deprived, the downtrodden and the weak. Amr then added that there is a fifth feature which is the best of all. It is that they restrain the kings from perpetrating injustice and oppression.

By Farida Khanam

The Habit to Learn

The second Caliph Umar Farooq used to learn something or the other from the people he met. It has been recorded that he once asked a companion of the Prophet as to what was meant by *taqwa* (fear of God). The companion replied: "O, Leader of the Believers (title of the Caliph), have you ever crossed a path lined on both sides by thorny shrubs?" Caliph Umar replied in the affirmative. He then asked the Caliph as to what he did on such occasions. The Caliph replied, "I gathered my clothes to myself, and walked along my path taking all precautions." The companion replied, "This is the stuff of *taqwa*."

Caliph Umar did the same in other matters as well. To a camel man he would put questions concerning camels; to a herdsman he would put questions about sheeps and goats. Similarly he would ask his visitors questions concerning their respective fields, in which they were knowledgeable. In this way, the Caliph learnt many things about fields other than his own.

In modern times, this is called the spirit of enquiry. From the scientific viewpoint this is of the utmost importance. In fact, it is only those who possess this inquisitive spirit who can scale the heights of scholarship in any field. This is extremely important both for the common man as well as for the scholar.

Usually people are interested only in talking, instead of listening. This is a permanent obstacle to academic progress. Great scientific progress can never be achieved by such persons. When you are talking, your level of existence remains just where it was before. But when you are listening, you are in fact adding to your knowledge. Anyone of a proper scientific temper will listen more than talk, and when he meets a person he will ask questions of him in order to obtain more knowledge and information from him.

There is a wealth of knowledge all around you. But it comes into one's possession only if one knows the art of acquiring it.

Moral Concept of Islam

Ethics is the subject matter common to both religion and philosophy, yet it is approached by them in basically different ways. Religion presents moral principles as divine dictates while philosophy simultaneously looks into both 'what' and 'why.' The latter preoccupies itself with questions like why it is that what is morally true is after all true.

This difference of approach has created a considerable gap between the two disciplines. In religion, ethics is defined as a known and undisputably established set of moral principles. Being a divine dictate, it is quite exact in form and content. On the contrary, right from the early Greeks of pre-Christian times down to the modern western thinkers of the twentieth century, no philosopher has been able to formulate precise ethical criteria of human action. Every distinguished philosopher has established his own school of thought, but has failed to give to the world a commonly accepted moral code.

Our point of view is that human limitations are a permanent obstacle to our finding an answer to the question 'why.' Therefore, we have chosen a practical solution rather than depend upon the uncertain outcome of philosophical dialogue. Here, our stress will be on explaining in plain terms the basic concept of ethics as presented by Islam.

Cosmic Approach

The Qur'an says that God created seven tiers of the sky, and that no imperfection will ever be detected in God's creation (67:4)

God created a great universe humming with a multitude of activities going on in a disciplined and orderly fashion with no irregularities. The performance of each and every part of it is par excellence.

Divine Ethics

Nature is controlled by God, while in human life the course of action is determined by man's own intention. If man has been exempted from following the same system as has been decreed by God for the rest of the universe, it is because God has placed him on trial in this world. God has given man such freedom to prove whether he has the will and capacity to remain on the straight and narrow path. That is why the Prophet took care to urge his fellow men to "follow divine morals."

The Islamic ethic is based on the concept of morality being a universal reality. God has determined similar standards of conduct both for man and for the rest of the universe, and nature in its entirety serves as a model for human conduct. What Miguel de Cervantes has said about a good painter is also true of a good man. He says:

Good painters imitate nature, bad ones vomit it.

The part of nature distinct from man is obliged by divine decree to abide by – in scientific language – the law of nature. The existence of this law is confirmed by the Qur'an when it speaks of the earth and the sky being subject to divine dictates. The Qur'an further makes it obligatory for man to follow these same dictates. There is, indeed, a single divine law to be observed by men and nature alike. Where man has to do this of his own free will and by his own intention, nature does so out of compulsion.

The same principle of Islamic conduct is professed in the third chapter of the Qur'an:

Do they seek for other than the religion of God, while all creatures in the heavens and on earth have, willing or unwilling, bowed to His Will? (3:83)

This verse clearly indicates that God wishes to see human life resting on the same principles that He has laid down for the rest of nature. Human life too should reflect the same obedience to rules that nature manifests for our benefit time and time again.

Unity and Organisation

It is set forth in the Qur'an that there is a path for man determined by God. So all men should follow the same divine path. The same rule is applied in the Qur'an to the honey bee. God commanded the honey bee to follow the divine path and the way honey bee works demonstrates that it remains on that divinely determined path. Such behaviour should be imitated by man, for the life style of the honey bee is an ideal example of social organisation. The process of preparing honey involves the participation of thousands of honey bees, who work in close coordination with their fellow bees, each bee performing its tasks in a highly disciplined and organised manner. The cooperative spirit, self-discipline and organisation are prerequisites for the smooth running of all social structures. Human beings should pattern their social living along exactly the same lines, albeit in accordance with different sets of circumstances. The Qur'an describes this concerted and organised activity as divinely approved action.

No Interference

The Qur'an says:

The sun is not allowed to overtake the moon, nor does the night outpace the day. Each in its own orbit runs (36:40).

This verse points to a divine law prevailing on the planets and in space. It enjoins every heavenly body to move in its respective orbit and not to encroach upon the orbit of another heavenly body. It is, in a way, a physical allegory of a divinely approved social principle. By using the analogy of the stars and the heavenly bodies, God demonstrates the law that He wishes to see incorporated in human life with conscious effort.

This suggests that every human being has to function in his own particular sphere without trespassing upon the domain of any other individual.

This Quranic law is illustrated by an incident which took place in a western country, shortly after it had won freedom. One of its citizens came out on to the street, vigorously flapping his arms. In his excitement he hit the nose of a passerby. The latter asked the freedom-lover why he had hit him on the nose. He retorted by saying that his country was now free and that, in consequence, he was free to do whatever he wanted. The passerby politely remarked, "Your freedom ends where my nose begins."

Every individual in this world has freedom of action. Yet this freedom is not limitless. People are bound to act within the confines of their own spheres and to enjoy their freedom without disturbing the peace and freedom of others. This is basic to proper conduct as laid down in the Qur'an. God's confinement of the movement of different heavenly bodies to their respective orbits provides a paradigm on which to base the human code of conduct.

One of the Qur'anic verses suggests in figurative language that man should not be stony-hearted:

Thenceforth were your hearts Hardened, they became Like a rock and even worse In hardness, for among rocks There are some from which Rivers gush forth; others There are which when split asunder send forth water and others which sink For fear of God, and God is Not unmindful of what you do.

In other words, man should be large-hearted enough to embrace the truth whenever it is revealed to him, and when confronted with man's oppression of man, his heart should be rent with agony. He should, moreover, adopt a submissive rather than a rebellious posture.

Just as a fountain of water gushes forth from among the rocks, so should the spirit of submission to the truth flow from man's heart. And just as the trees and mountains bow to the will of God, so should man submit totally to God's command. Indeed, man's surrender to God should have all the speed and finality of the landslide.

Soft Spokenness

The Qur'an says that birds sing the praise of God with the words *Subhan Allah*: (All praise is due to God)

Do you not see how God is praised by those in the heavens and on earth and the birds (of the air) with wings spread? He notes the prayers and praises of all His creatures and has knowledge of all their actions (24:41).

At another place the Qur'an describes a donkey's braying as the worst possible sound. Therefore men should refrain from speaking in the strident tones of the donkey, and express themselves rather with gentleness and moderation.

And be modest in your gait, and lower your voice; for the harshest of sounds without doubt is the braying of the ass. (31:19)

It suggests that God loves a voice that is graced by the sweetness of bird song, not one like the braying of ass which is an affront to the hearer's ears.

Of all human organs, the tongue is the most valuable, as it is the means of exchange of ideas among human beings. There are two ways of using this organ: one pleases by virtue of its sincerity, rationality and politeness, e.g. in the bringing of good tidings; the other is marred by abrasiveness, taunts and sarcasm, and in tone is like "the braying of an ass," which can never be to the liking of the hearer. The Qur'an disapproves of the latter manner as being uncouth, and insists that man's speech should have, an agreeable effect on the hearer.

Forgiveness

The misbehaviour of Joseph's step brothers towards him was deeply tormenting for his father Jacob. Naturally, he had serious grounds for complaint against Joseph's brothers. But rather than express his grief to the wrongdoers, Jacob turned in anguish to God, although his anguish had been caused by men.

This diversion of negative reaction away from the blameworthy and towards the Almighty is paralleled in the physical world in a number of explicit ways. Seasonal rain water is usually excessive. If the entire amount of this water stayed in the fields and inhabited areas, it would cause widespread disaster. But this does not happen, for the excessive amount of water is directed by nature into rivulets and rivers, leaving behind the water actually required.

Subscribing to the same law of nature in social life, man should divert all of the detrimental elements of his emotions towards God.

Community life leads, among other things, to mutual complaints and bitterness. If these complaints were expressed before the persons thought responsible, the whole of society would be turned into a battlefield. In such a situation man should adopt the same course of action as that taken by nature, namely, the diversion of all excessive emotions to God's account and thereafter the devotion of oneself to positive social uplift. Nature teaches us to keep with us always a 'diversion pool' to which may be diverted the negative emotions occurring in our hearts towards others, thus enabling us to lead a balanced life.

Good for Evil

It is stated in the Qur'an that one of the characteristics of the favourite devotees of God is their ability to forgive, even when they are angry. The Prophet taught his followers to treat gently even those who misbehaved with them. In other words, man should return good for evil, and remain pacific in the face of provocation.

This altruistic conduct finds a close parallel in the physical world in the symbiotic relationship established by God between man and the tree. To continue to exist, man must continually breathe in air, retaining the air's oxygen and exhaling its carbon dioxide. If the tree were to imitate this progress, the world would become unlivable, because the air would become polluted with poisonous gases. But God has so ordained things that the tree will do the opposite of man, i.e. it will breathe in carbon dioxide, thus cleansing the atmosphere, and will breathe out oxygen, thus supplying human beings and animals with the basic fuel of life.

The model for the behaviour demanded of man by the Qur'an is to be found in the reciprocal bond between man and tree. But where the tree plays its part automatically in the natural course of things, man in the social sphere must deliberately, and of his own free will, choose to return love for hatred, comfort for pain, forgiveness for anger, and gentleness for provocation. In short, a negative attitude should be responded to by positive behaviour. Such conduct having no room for 'tit-for-tat' logic, you should never hesitate to give oxygen to one who gives you carbon dioxide.

Summary

The standard of conduct maintained by God through His direct control over nature has to be exhibited by man in his personal life under his own control. The pattern of action laid down by God in the rest of the world on the physical level should be reflected in the world of man on the human plane.

What is found in the physical world in the form of iron is required in the human world in the form of firmness of character. The stream trickling down the mountains is synonymous, in the human world, with gentleness and soft-heartedness. All that exists in the physical world as predictable in character corresponds to the fulfillment of promises on the human level. Whatever exists in the physical world in the form of fine texture and fragrance has its counterpart in the human world in good behaviour and fair dealing.

The absorption of carbon dioxide by trees and the emission of oxygen that helps man breathe imply that man in his practical life should do good even to those who do evil to him. This is because natural objects do not contradict each other; all of them are engaged in performing their assigned functions with utter devotion. The same principle applies to human life, where man should devote himself to positive efforts and completely abstain from destructive actions. Nature pursues the principle of recycling and decomposition. Waste materials are recycled and turned into gases. Leaves when separated from branches do not decay but turn into manure. The implications of this for human life is of great importance, as it suggests that the wealth spent by a man should be re-utilized by his fellow men. The efforts initiated by one should be beneficial for others too. Many things are taking place in nature on a grand scale. Every component is performing its respective function precisely and regularly without receiving any apparent reward. The same selfless devotion, with no thought of reward, is expected from men in the performance of their duties. High mountains and all vertical objects cast their shadows low

down upon the earth. Seen symbolically, this should prompt human beings to acquire the habit of modesty. One should neither boast of one's achievements before others, nor consider oneself superior to others.

Islamic conduct is, indeed, synonymous with natural conduct. This conduct is maintained in nature unconsciously while, in human life, it is controlled by the individual's own conscious efforts and determination.

The Goal of Life

I only created mankind and the jinn that they might worship Me. I demand no livelihood of them, nor do I ask that they should feed Me.

God alone is the Munificent Giver, the Mighty One, the Invincible. The lot of the wrongdoers will be like that of their predecessors. Let them not challenge Me to hurry it on. Woe then to the Unbelievers when the threatened day arrives! (51:56-60).

God has power of His own in all matters. However, He has created angels in order to manage His vast empire. But the situation of human beings is different. They have not been created to fulfill any personal or managerial requirement of God. Their sole Purpose is the worship of God.

Worship means surrendering-before the Almighty in the full sense of the word. According to Ibn Jurayh (Tafsir Ibn Kathir) worship, in essence, is realization (*ma'arifat*) of God. It is desired of man that he should make his own discovery of God. He should recognise God although He is invisible. The life that takes shape as a result of this realisation is called servitude of God.

When a pot floating in the river fills to the brim, it sinks. Similarly when man's span of action is completed, death comes unannounced. One who reforms himself before his pot is full saves himself. One who remains oblivious till his last day of the necessity to reform is doomed to eternal destruction.

If the oppressors are given a long rope, it does not mean that they have been left scot-free. It only means that it is not the *Sunnah* (way) of God to seize them in haste.

God has not created man for the completion of His Being. Rather man has been given this opportunity to prove himself a true servant of God in this world of trial in order that he may be deserving of the blessings of God for all eternity.

Guidance by the Prophets

Has he not heard of what is preached in the books of Musa and Ibrahim, who fulfilled his duty: that no soul shall bear another's burden and that each man shall be judged by his own labours; that his labours shall be scrutinized and that he shall be justly requited for them; that all things shall in the end return to God? (35:35-43)

Along with creating man, God started a chain of prophethood for human guidance. In every age and in every nation prophets have come and conveyed the message of God to men. While provision for the sustenance of life remained constantly available in this world, the principles of how to lead this life were sent to man by God again and again as the occasion demanded. Each prophet was truly a representative of God. But, with the passage of time, the books brought by the messengers were altered and marred by the interpolations of their followers. Thus the original divine guidance became veiled by these human additions. Ultimately God sent the Arab Prophet with the Qur'an. And God Himself undertook the responsibility of preserving the Qur'an in toto so that it might remain a source of authentic guidance for mankind for all time to come.

The essence of the reality revealed by God through the Prophet is that everyone will necessarily be rewarded for his actions in this world. None can escape the consequences of his actions, nor can anyone save another. Those who fail to take heed of the warnings by the Prophet are the most foolish in this world.

So far as man's relation to God is concerned, everyone is responsible for his own actions. None can share in the consequences of another's deeds. Nor will anyone reap a harvest in the next world other than what he has sown here in this world.

The Oneness of God

Say: "He is God, the One, the eternally besought of all. He begets not, nor was He begotten. And there is none comparable to Him" (112:1-4).

All that is in heaven and earth gives glory to God. He is the Mighty, the Wise. His is the kingdom of the heavens and the earth. He ordains life and death and has power over all things. He is the First and Last, the Visible and the Unseen. He has knowledge of all things (57:1-3), and he that renounces idol-worship and puts his faith in God shall grasp a firm handle that will never break.

God there is no God but Him, the Living, the Eternal One. Neither drowsiness nor sleep overtakes Him. His is what the heavens and the earth contain. Who can intercede with Him except by His permission? He knows what is before and behind men. They can grasp only that part of His knowledge which He wills. His throne is as vast as the heavens and the earth, and the preservation of both does not weary him. He is the Sublime, the Tremendous. God hears all and knows all.

God is the Patron of the faithful He leads them from darkness to the light. As for the unbelievers, their patrons are false Gods, who lead them from light to darkness. They are the heirs of Hell and shall abide in it for ever (2:255-257). Yet there shall be no compulsion in religion. True guidance is never imposed by force.

All Praise is Due to God

A tree is unaware of its own extraordinary significance. A flower does not realize what a delicate and exquisite masterpiece it really is. A bird is oblivious to its own breathtaking beauty. Though all things in this world are classic specimens of the most exquisite art, they never come to know themselves as such.

For whom, then, is this beautiful and gracious display? It is all for man's benefit. Man is the only being in the known universe who can perceive beauty in a thing and appreciate its excellence. God has created exquisite works of art in worldly form and enabled man to apprehend them. He has given man a tongue to express his wonder at and veneration of God's stupendous feats of creation. What he utters is praise, or admiration of God. It is a tribute of the most sublime sentiments, expressed in human words and offered to God.

Praise means being moved at the sight of God's craftsmanship and spontaneously expressing one's realization of His perfection. "God, all praise is due to You. You are chaste and exalted. God, count me among the believers, and raise me not up blind like those who failed to acknowledge Your perfection or perceive Your beauty." Praise is constant remembrance of God in this manner, in Arabic or any other language.

Witness of the Universe

In surah *al-Anaam* of the Qur'an there occurs a description of flatterers who ask the Prophet to show a miracle to prove the credibility of the message brought by him from God. The Qur'an says that faith does not depend on miraculous events but on man's ability to derive inspiration and deduce messages from such signs as can be perceived with open eyes. Anyone who possesses this quality of perception will realise that the miracles he demands are already in existence. Can there be a greater miracle than the existence of the universe with all its diverse manifestations? And does it not confirm the truth of the message of God brought by the Prophet? No miracle can convince a person who is determined not to learn a lesson from the events taking place before his very eyes.

The Qur'an cites the other creatures, like birds and animals as further examples of God's miraculous creation. At other points the earth and the sky too become parts of this ecology. In surah *Bani Isra'il* God suggests that these creatures have many lessons to teach men. They are, like men, creatures of God. They too have their way of life as man has his.

However, as compared to the human world, the greater part of the rest of the world, comprising vegetation, natural objects and animal life, is in a completely different category. For billions of years that part has been continuously pursuing a definite course, with none of its elements showing the slightest deviation from its predestined function. It is man who does not accept or abide by a preordained scheme of things; every human being has the desire to act according to his own free will.

What does the Prophet demand from you other than the avowal that there is one single Creator of the world? The prudent course for you would be to eschew pride and stubbornness and obey the Creator. If you seriously think about the universe around you, you will realise that the entire expanse of the earth and the sky is evidence of the truthfulness of the call to God. The phenomenal world where man lives is itself an expression of submission to its Creator. How does man, who is a negligible part of the vastness of nature, justify his rebellion against his Maker?

Every particle of the expanding universe is performing its respective function. Each moves on a set course, clearly indicating that some powerful and omniscient Being is controlling it by His will. The taking to a separate course of action as a matter of human volition in this vast universe is a pointer to man's deviation from total assimilation with the rest of the universe.

The entire universe is in consistent progress and motion. None of the major orbiting bodies ever collide with each other. To indulge in conflict is a purely human characteristic. The entire universe, for all its incessant action, heads towards a positive goal. Man, on the contrary, opts for such courses of action as lead to chaos and destruction.

Two separate water bodies do not trespass upon each other's territory. Even a herd of bulls moves and feeds within its defined territories. One does not cross over into the other's land. It is man who does not want to abide by any laws. Honey bees accomplish their constructive work with exemplary discipline and by the strict division of labour. But man creates disorder by breaking rules. Ants and birds rely on their own labour for their subsistence instead of snatching others' food, whereas man exploits his fellow beings in order to fill his own belly.

No wild animal attacks and kills its own kind, but man does not shrink from shedding human blood. Even reptiles harm other creatures only when they have to defend themselves. Man oppresses his fellow beings irrationally, and adopts gluttonous ways in all his affairs, while animals eat, copulate or build abodes just to satisfy the basic need and urge.

Animals engage themselves in their own specific spheres, while man is fond of interfering in others' spheres. Scores of sheep intermingled with another flock will gather around their own shepherd whenever he calls them. But the human being is different from all other animals. When man is called to God and His Prophet, he deliberately ignores the call.

Man's existence, be it as small as a grain of mustard, is a part of the universe. Therefore, no course other than that followed by the greater universe will do man any good. Where man chooses a separate path, despite such clear guidance, he deprives himself of the bounties inherent in the universe and deserves to be displaced from it. All universal phenomena should derecognise him. He should be denied of all the blessings of the universe and remain in a state of eternal deprivation.

Those who are not ready to co-exist with nature, have no right to benefit from its advantages. Nature with its entire wealth should be given to only those human beings who not only coexist with nature but also obey the Creator, in the same way as nature has been doing since time immemorial. Those who take to the course of rebellion against God should receive no share in the comforts and pleasures afforded by nature in the form of light, air and water. They have no right either to build a house for themselves in this world, or to eat off the fat of the land, or to enjoy themselves in any other ways. Justice demands that all possible paradisiacal comforts of nature be bestowed on those obedient to God, while the disobedient deserve to be deprived of all divine favours.

Bearing Fruit

The business of planting an orchard does not begin with the holding of an orchard conference. No, indeed. It begins by obtaining seedlings and providing every single one with such favourable conditions as will enable it to develop its potential and grow into a fully developed tree. When one has done this with innumerable seedlings, one can then expect to have an orchard.

In this respect, a nation is somewhat like an orchard. Build the individual and you build the nation. If hidden potential is to be developed, it takes education, encouragement, and the provision of a proper environment at an individual level very early in the whole process, just as a sapling must be put into well-prepared ground and given the right type and quantity of nutrients, water, sunlight, etc. If people are properly instructed, while they are still young and receptive and by people who adopt a caring, positive attitude, they develop a healthy awareness of what their commitments to society should be and what it means to be part of a nation. If callous youths are to be turned into real men, they have to have the feeling inculcated in them that to achieve positive ends they must continually keep up a peaceful and ameliorative struggle, one which will create harmony and eschew conflict, one which will solve, and not create problems for their fellow men.

Although we must accept the fact that this is a highly competitive world, there is nothing to prevent us from endeavouring to cooperate with and encourage cooperation from others. If we stand shoulder to shoulder with our fellow men in the face of the most heartless rivalries, there is no obstacle that we cannot overcome, no peril that we cannot face. But if we do not see to it that such ideas are propagated and accepted among people in their formative years, we cannot expect to find many who will be willing to cooperate. No matter how basically good the fruit trees in our orchard are, they will not blossom and bear fruit unless they are consistently well tended.

The Reason for Differences

Men, We have created you from a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes that you might get to know one another. The noblest of you in Allah's sight is the most righteous of you. Allah is Wise and All-knowing (49:13).

People appear to be quite different from one another, but all of them have descended from one pair of parents – Adam and Eve. When God decreed that a creature such as man should come into existence, he created an archetypal couple – a male and a female, in order to initiate human procreation. As the numbers of humans increased, they began spreading over different parts of the globe, until the entire world, over a long period of time, came to be inhabited by men and women.

Geographical conditions vary in different places, in some parts being very hot, in others very cold. Eating habits also vary from place to place, in some parts non-vegetarian food forming the staple diet, in others, vegetarian food, etc.

Such geographic and cultural differences resulted gradually in variations in people's skin colour, features, height, temperament etc. In this way, some were black or brown, others white, and distinctive racial characteristics developed. Yet all these differences are relative, not real. These are only for the sake of identification, and are not meant to form the basis for discriminatory practices or the establishment of superiority. Most of the evil in this world is caused by people having come to regard apparent differences as real ones. That is why they begin to discriminate between people, thus producing unending prejudice and the injustice that goes with it.

As a matter of origin, all human beings are equal. If there is any basis for discrimination between them, it can only be in terms of how pious and God fearing they are. Difference between one person and another has to be based on real attributes and not just on appearances.

Towards Death

Death will overtake everybody; no one can escape from it. But death is not the same for everyone. Some have made God their goal in life; they speak and keep silence for His sake alone; their attention is focused entirely on the after-life. Death is for them the end of a long terrestrial journey towards their Lord.

Others have forgotten their Lord; they do not do things for God's sake; they are traveling away from their Lord. They are like rebels who roam at large for a few days, and then death seizes them and brings them to justice.

Death is not the same for both types of people as it might seem. For one, death is to partake of the Lord's hospitality; for the other, it is to be cast into His dungeon. For one, death is the gate to paradise; for the other it will be the day when he is thrown into hell's raging fire, to burn there forever as a punishment for his rebelliousness.

Believers have a different attitude to death from unbelievers. They are concerned with what comes in the wake of death; they focus their attention on gaining an honorable position in the life after death. Unbelievers, on the other hand, are caught up on worldly affairs. Their ultimate ambition is worldly honour and prestige. Under present circumstances, those who have consolidated their position on earth seem to be successful, but death will shatter this facade. It will become clear that those who seemed to have no base in the world were in fact standing on the most solid of foundations, while the position of those who had reached a high status in the world will be exposed as false. Death will obliterate everything; afterwards only that which has some worth in the afterlife will remain. We are obsessed with the world which meets our eyes. We fail to pay attention to the call of truth. If we were to see the next life with our worldly vision, we would immediately submit to God. We would realize that if we do not submit to Him today, we will have to do so in the future world, when submission will profit no one.

The Angels

Amongst the multitudes of beings created by God in His omnipotence are creatures of great luminosity called angels. They are divine servants of impeccable loyalty who convey God's commands throughout the length and breadth of the universe, attending to the workings of His immeasurable kingdom under His all-seeing eye. Their numbers perforce are legion.

The cosmic machine must run with flawless and never-ending consistency. The earth, moon, sun and stars must revolve in their pre-ordained orbits for all eternity. God has willed this to be so, and His angels are the divine instruments through which he ensures the perfect functioning of the universe.

From time immemorial a water cycle of awesome complexity has continued to support life in its myriad forms. Trees and plants of tremendous diversity emerge from the earth at every instant. A whole host of creatures from Man right down to the humblest insect are born and provided for every day. How is it then that such a great multiplicity of events – all of them extremely complex – can take place contemporaneously?

The Prophets in their wisdom have taught that this is all part of a divine order which the Almighty controls through invisible angels acting as His intermediaries. It is they who carry out His commandments and communicate His word to the prophets. They preserve a record of man's actions by means of which God decides which individuals and which nations shall be rewarded or punished. It is the angels who take possession of the human soul at the moment of death, and it is they who will sound the last trumpet which shall throw the whole universe into disarray. It is then that the righteous shall dwell forever in Paradise, while the sinful shall be cast down into hell-fire and eternal damnation.

Social Development

Religion has a great role to play in social development. But this role is not that of providing a scheme of social development in the structural sense. It is rather a matter of developing individuals, the units of society, as a result of which the whole of society becomes developed. Thus the role of religions is to develop the individuals directly, as a result of which, society is indirectly developed.

It would be true to say that man by nature is a development-seeking animal. By the urge of his own nature, the human being wants to make progress. The barrier to progress is not the absence of any external system; it is, in fact, anti-social thinking on the part of the individual for various reasons, for instance, feelings of jealousy, arrogance, violence, greed, revenge, etc. Religion is actually a scheme of spiritual uplift, which puts an end to all kinds of negative behaviour in individuals. In consequence, the process of social development is set in motion without any obstacle in its way.

In this respect, the role of religion in social development is to remove the trapdoor which acts as a barrier to social development. In this connection I will make three references from the three religions to make my point clear.

Once the Prophet of Islam was seated at a place in Madinah. A funeral procession passed by: The Prophet stood up in respect. A companion of the Prophet remarked: O Prophet it was the procession of a Jew.

The Prophet replied: Was he not a human being?' From this incident we learn that every religion teaches its believers to accord respect to one and all alike. Everyone is equal. Everyone deserves due respect from others as a human being. Therefore, by ignoring differences, one should regard one another as brothers, irrespective of religious persuasions.

Another principle in this connection is that which we learn from a sermon by Jesus Christ. Enjoining his followers, Christ said: "To him who strikes you on the one cheek offer the other also. And from him who takes away your cloak, do not withhold your tunic either." (Luke, 6:29)

This gives us a lesson, in symbolic language, of unilateral adjustment. This means that one should be willing to resolve controversial matters unilaterally, so that a normal atmosphere may be maintained between all parties.

We learn another important point in this connection from an incident relating to Swami Vivekananda. Once a friend of the Swami wanted to test his mettle. So he placed on a table in his sitting room all the holy books of the major religion one on top of the other. He deliberately placed the Gita below all the other books, while the Bible was placed on the top. The host expected that Swamiji would be provoked on seeing this taking it to be an insult to his religion. But, contrary to his expectation, Swamiji smiled and remarked: "The foundation is really good!"

From this incident we learn that man should develop in him the ability to convert the negative into the positive; a minus into a plus. Neither social harmony nor social development can be achieved without this quality in this world full of differences and conflicts.

To put it briefly, respect for all, unilateral adjustment and positive attitudes – these are the three most important values in social development.

Religion basically produces these ethical and spiritual qualities within the individual. And when they are present within the members of a society, all kinds of development will be automatically set in motion. Once truly launched, nothing can come in their way.

Road Block

When a road is under repair, a notice bearing the words "Road Closed" is put up to warn unwary travelers. But this does not mean that the path to one's destination is irrevocably barred. There are always other highways and by-ways – it is just a question of looking around for them. Sometimes one can reach one's destination just as well by zigzagging through narrow lanes and alley-ways. The only difference is that this takes somewhat longer, and one has to keep one's wits about one to negotiate narrower roadways and sharper turnings. But arrive one finally does.

Life's journey is very often like this. One would like to proceed by broad straight routes, moving fast and reaching one's goal in the most direct possible way. But, so often such roads are blocked, and achieving success begins to seem a very difficult matter. But for every major route which is blocked, there are always several minor roads which are open. It is just a question of having to go about things in a roundabout way. This is particularly true if you meet with an adversary and feel that you are unable to confront him head-on. It is then that you must find some indirect means of dealing with him. Often compromise or adjustment is the best solution.

When in one particular field there seems to be a discouraging lack of opportunities, one can certainly search for and find opportunities in some other field. When you fail to find a place for yourself in the front row, you can always make do with one in the rear, until a place up ahead finally falls vacant for you. When you cannot find people to extend a helping hand to you, press on fearlessly and strike out on your own. When you need things from people to help you on in life and no one seems ready to be generous, stop thinking of how deprived you are and try instead to earn God's blessings.

For every closed door, there is always another which is open – but only to those who have the eyes to see it, and the courage to march through it.

31 January-February 2000

Wonders of Nature

God send down water from the sky, bringing forth gardens of delight. Try as you may, you cannot cause such trees to grow.

(Qur'an 27:60)